

50 States Project: Idaho

By RATAPU RECOMMENDS, February 3, 2016



Growing up, I knew Idaho for three things:

- The parts of My Own Private Idaho that actually take place in Idaho.
- The state where Napoleon Dynamite lives (more specifically, Preston, Idaho, more specifically YO TINA)
- Potatoes

I spent a short period of my childhood in Washington State and for reasons legitimate or not, Idaho got a particularly bad rap for being “that place” “over there.” (Points vaguely right with squinted eyes.) I never would have imagined Idaho made any alcohol apart from straight up vodka, but if you have learned anything from this project, it is that potatoes should never blind you from the viticulture potential of true-blue America.

Idaho wine is hot. Plain and simple. Let’s get some history juices going. Like a good amount of America, from Reconstruction until Prohibition, Idaho’s wine region was booming. After Idaho’s vineyards were shut down, wine wasn’t grown again in the state until the 1970s, when grapes were planted in Snake River Valley. The golden gem in the Idaho diadem (*snaps*, I liked that one too), Ste. Chapelle Winery, opened in 1976.

From 1976-2002, Idaho wine production was tighter than the Ivy Leagues, with only a handful of wineries producing modest quality wine, most of which was kept local. Suddenly, in 2007, Snake River Valley was approved as an AVA and the region grew to more than 8,000 square miles. By 2013, there were over 50 wineries in the state with wine being exported internationally and award winning acclaim being thrown on the state like gold medals were going out of fashion.

In terms of terroir, southern Idaho is an ideal place for wine. Idaho has very cold winters, which allow the vines to go dormant and keep them healthy and enriched for the warm springs and summers. The growing season has some #peak diurnals, keeping acids high whilst building robust grapes with higher sugar content, which yield higher alcohol wines. Unlike neighbor Oregon, Idaho can make fuller bodied reds and whites, while simultaneously keeping the acidity that parts of California



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desperately lacks. (Acidity also ensures longer shelf life for wines, making Idaho wines not only incredible steals for a quick drink with friends, but great wines to lay down in the cellar.)

BOOM. In the Snake Valley AVA, the fertile, well-draining soil is rich with ancient volcanic sediment. (Fun fact, Idaho had (has?) volcanoes.) The terrain is similar to the best growing regions in Australia and is the perfect playing field for top-quality wines.

Idaho's star grape is Riesling, which is also a grape notorious for wearing its 'hood on its sleeve. The Snake River Valley is highly elevated (more so than most of the Pacific Northwest) and most vineyards are planted with southwestern exposure, which allows for prime ripening. The dry continental weather patterns yields a more aromatic Riesling than Washington state and even many of New York's prized Rieslings, skewing towards the stone and tropical fruit. However, because of the above mentioned acidity, these Rieslings rarely have the nauseating sickly sweet flavors of some of your least-favorite supermarket wines. These wines are mature and unique, skewing medium-dry to dry, with a decent amount of late harvest dessert wines being sold with equal flair and flame.

Some wineries like Ste. Chappelle and Snake River Winery are branching out from Riesling to grow grapes that enjoy Idaho's climate and soil composition, like Tempranillo and Merlot. Some places are even trying out GSM blends (grenache, syrah, mourvedre) and as global warming brings up the temperature in parts of Idaho, these Bordeaux grapes might see particular success in the next ten years. (I'm not saying Idaho red wine futures are > polar bears, but I'm not not saying that.)

For this tasting, I tried Koenig Vineyards 2012 Sunny Slope Cuvée Riesling. This is a Madame Maxime of a Riesling at 13.6%, but it isn't messing around. It is bone-dry and yet pulsating with aromas, reminiscent of an Austrian Gruner or an Oregon Pinot Gris. It's a cabana in the glass, with pineapple, melon, apricot and guava all fighting for your nasal attention. The taste doesn't have the signature minerality that a lot of the best New York and German Rieslings yield, but it does have an almost lanolin finish that makes it delightfully easy to drink.

It was also \$14 meaning ADIOS YELLOWTAIL RIESLING.

Standby for the breakdown on ID:

Idaho wine is already making moves in the domestic market. While Idaho is only the 22nd largest wine distributor in the US, it is a wine state with a wide reach. You can find the wares of wineries like Ste. Chapelle, Snake River and Koenig at a number of stores in NYC, DC, Boston and all across the West Coast, with further expansion happening across the rest of the US.

Idaho's expansion is taking a little bit of a break, but in five years everybody will be drinking it. Just like it took everyone forever to get into Portuguese wine but now all the cool kids are drinking it, Idaho's competitively priced rieslings, merlots, malbecs and GSMs will be hanging from every 2020 hipsters' handlebars.

Its quality is....hot, hot, hot. Can I say it enough?



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